

Civil rights activist clergy see new generation rising for voting rights

by [Henry Gass](#)

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([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) Fifty years after the passage of the landmark Voting Rights Act, two legends of the civil rights movement suggested that the fight for voting rights continues—and is gaining momentum.

James Lawson and C.T. Vivian, both ordained clergy, went to Middle Tennessee State University in Murfreesboro Thursday to support students in their quest to change the state's voter identification laws. The men, Tennesseans and friends of Martin Luther King Jr., worked for decades to bring about the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Now, with the United States Supreme Court in 2013 striking down key provisions of the act and states passing voter ID laws that critics say infringe on minorities' ability to vote, the time is ripe for fresh activism, the men told the Associated Press.

And they see it in the students. "It lets me know that we will eventually overcome," Vivian said. "And that ... the work we've done for this nation is slowly being fulfilled."

The issue in Tennessee is that the state won't accept identification cards from out of state, nor will it accept student identification cards from Tennessee colleges and universities. A group of out-of-state students—who have neither form of identification—has sued the state.

More broadly, 17 states have passed laws requiring voters to present a form of photo identification. Proponents say the goal is to prevent voter fraud. But the laws have been driven by Republican state legislatures, and critics say they impact poor and minority voters most, since they are the most likely to not have an acceptable form of ID. They are also core Democratic constituencies.

Data suggest that voter fraud is exceedingly rare.

In 2013, the Supreme Court threw out Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act, a section that required all or parts of 15 states with a history of discrimination in voting to get

federal approval before changing the way they hold elections. Chief Justice John Roberts said the provision was outdated.

Vivian told AP “it’s a shame” that such battles over voting rights are still being fought. He has been active in civil rights since the 1940s and was assaulted in Selma, Alabama, in 1965.

While contemporary voting rights activists are facing new challenges, they “definitely draw a lot of their inspiration” from the 1950s and 1960s, says John Sherman, a staff attorney for the Fair Elections Legal Network, which filed the lawsuit in March on behalf of the Nashville Student Organizing Committee.

He noted one March protest in the statehouse. When a legislative committee rejected a motion to include student IDs on the list of approved voter IDs, the students filling the room stood up and started singing the iconic civil rights song “Can’t Turn Me ‘Round.”

But today’s activists also reflect past generations in other, less glamorous ways, said Shawn Alexander, director of the Langston Hughes Center at the University of Kansas.

“It’s a passing of the torch on some levels, but it’s also people organizing in the manner they’ve always organized,” Alexander said.

That begins with litigation—the kind of litigation that the students in Tennessee are now engaged in.

“The thing people forget with the civil rights movement is each direct action campaign comes out of litigation behind it,” he says.

As early as 1960, Alexander says, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and other civil rights organizations had been running local get-out-the-vote campaigns.

They “were working at the local level trying to take [people] to polls, being denied, and then taking [the state] to litigation,” he said. “People forget the long struggle that took place. . . . They jump straight to Selma.”

Today, of the states that have passed strict voter ID laws, seven allow college or university ID cards, according to Sherman of FELN. Although Tennessee does not

allow students to use their ID cards, though it does allow faculty and staff to do so.

Inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement, other movements are finding a voice, said Justin Hansford, a professor at the St. Louis University School of Law.

“Civil rights victories often are won first in the streets, then in the courts,” he wrote in an e-mail. “Black Lives Matter has reinvigorated the youth and shown that their passion can lead to change, so hopefully a burgeoning voting rights movement can also gain steam.”